

Terms and Conditions Apply - opinion piece for VAI

Significant change however unsolicited is here and real, as Ms Karen Carpenter says *we have only just begun*. Usually this column focuses the work of a particular county. Regional arts is the phrase used, how regional, depends on your footing. Broadly there is sense that political power should remain local. Unlike the “arms-length” governance of the Arts Council, Local Arts has little distance from politics. This is why external panels of artists and curators and the mix of their policy work and practices includes external advice; it creates the opportunity for a break in direct alignment.

Good negotiations see the national arts budget comparatively preserved for 2012. Given a tightly resourced future for Arts Offices country-wide what conditions underlie? At the time of writing this, Local Authorities are finalising annual estimated budgets for 2012 and Arts Officers are facing considerable challenges.

Organisationally there is a second pranging at the erosion of capital; that of human resources. The national embargo on recruitment means there is little to no possibility of bringing new talent which tempers ambition and impacts on work-flow. This is a hugely important change at all levels within County and City Councils. Employees who advance are not replaced, older staff members, the ones with nuggets of institutional practice knowledge are wasted-out through early retirement schemes.

The potential of mobility is dampened; risk taking is low, maintaining achievements is not possible. For example the appointment of Philip Delamere as Arts Officer to Leitrim County, was great news, but his previous position as Roscommon Arts Officer is yet unfilled. Some Arts Officers who were managing staff of three and four people are now working on their own; with a remit for all art-forms and an entire county. In particular, a tier of public art specialists positions have disappeared, with exceptions in Mayo,

Dublin City, Sligo, Donegal County Councils who have maintained these posts or contracts. Some staff have taken on new duties.

Arts services resided in varying departments within Local Authority structures; such as Libraries, Tourism and Economic Development, Recreation and Amenities and so on. They are embedded within the organisational policy and annual programme. Tactically they are dependent on the goodwill, experience and vision of their colleagues who support and mediate their work organisationally. Much of their focus is spent servicing administration and inter-departmental needs as is the nature of any large body; the turning of the wheel is as much a job of work as mapping destinations.

Arts programmes, bursaries and projects, the public out-put, are new every year (there is programmatic consistency but the nature of the work changes). Budgets lines are small and widely spread. Payments for grants, projects and events use time and labour intensively. The governance of these small expenditures reflect conditions applied to much larger spends, consequently it can be difficult to be nimble and responsive. An engineer, housing or finance officer, for example, can spend the equivalent of annual arts budget in a day or a month. Efficiencies of scale and scope of work is radically different to the general practice of local government. Many of aspects of arts work is public, which needs attention and nuanced consideration in ways that might be unfamiliar to Arts Officers colleagues.

Largely there has been tremendous support for the work and expertise of the County Arts services from within their organisations. There has been a good level of interest in the potential of the arts, and Arts Officers have worked very hard to develop this potential. There seems to be little help offered in long-term thinking about sustainability or clarity about rationalisation. It is wonderful to consider imaginative scope, to have vision, be

creative, but there is also the wash-up to be done and the mortgage to pay.

It's at this juncture of aspiration, potential, action and that of resources management and advocacy that local arts are operating in. It's a tough job.

Creative thinking works well when it is extruded from a base of solidity. Solidity is now rocky and, in particular, discussions about longer term structures are needed. Up the line, acknowledgment of this generally is weak. I think this might explain the newer language of creative industry, and a renewed focus on cultural diplomacy, exchange, and collaboration being appropriated into the languages of the Civil Service and Education Institutions. It is a conscious or sub-conscious distancing for the realities of arts practice, (you know that bit where you actually make work) and re-aligns artists into a much wider scope of understanding which includes the music, fashion, video games, radio and TV production, and advertising industries. The language turns away from that of the individual artist and towards the word creative practitioner, creative clusters, and creative citizens.

This creative industries language represents a significant cultural shift as it places meaning on social and economic ends. The word investment replaces the word funding. Practically speaking, case making and brokering sensible values is the on-going work of many local arts officers. Perhaps what are urgently in need of attention are the visual arts, which have has little or no economy in the sense that there is no possibility of income to assist expenditure. Artists are collecting together to re-use city spaces, facilitated by city fathers, critically thinking as to how this plays out in the longer term is needed. It seems the collective value of artists mobility, flexibility and creative thinking is highly valued nationally but what will be the tangible supports.

As pressures' facing the overall maintenance of services at local government level increase, the possibility of arts development work and the argument for arts as having intrinsic value continues to abut the arts as a instrumental function. For example in Galway County the Arts Officer has taken on an aspect of tourism development, this maybe part due to the considerable capabilities of that individual, but from a wider or critical perspective this either erodes or aligns the service, a service change at the least. This direction, one of a more generalised scope of cultural work arising out of the arts services may continue to evolve as a number of City and County Council merge, Tipperary North and South will become one, Galway City and County, Limerick City and County, with more being mooted. This means two senior professional arts managers are available or one is spare - depending on the value and understanding placed on their work.

It will be interesting to see how the role changes as the broader remit, of creativity, imagination and innovation which is a European and National agenda settles. In cities and larger counties the arts office is associated with cultural provision beyond what might be traditionally regarded as arts, (arts and culture are often confused in this context). Culture has become an important aspect of the work of local government. The Arts Officer, when valued, works to influence and keeps the arts on agenda, *in the mix*, as they say.

Arts Officers have been part of a suite of cultural provision, including Heritage Officers, Sports Officers, Irish Language Officers, Events Officers, Cycling Officer (Dublin City) and a Walking Officer (Mayo). The Arts post is the longest standing of these and consequently many Arts Officers have built capital, are well respected and have levied good-will beyond their grade status. It is very important to acknowledge that their work has been underpinned by senior management which is apparent in some counties; others have not been so supported. This accounts for the varying levels of service, and activities around the Country. As central government policy

moves in the direction of greater autonomy for the local level, differences will appear, and the hope is that local or regional character and achievements will be retained. Arts provisions are non-statutory. Meeting aspects of the various Council's own work programme coupled with responsibilities to plan and deliver their annual arts work, which is part funded by Arts Council, is a serious reach where the Officer is a one-person show. Non-statutory services, rather than a public good in their own right, are considered to be a means to other ends.

The result of this is that a variation of approaches to service provision sensibly reflects the local contexts. Attempts to standardise services levels would be a retro-grade step, and much really quite radical work comes from understanding and being able to react to local contexts and conditions. Constancy and clarity in resourcing will be problematic into the future – this is no news – arts policy is the critical tool of navigation, and it needs to be frank now in how its addresses change and particularly reductions.

Policy needs to be creative to work as framework for direction rather than a document of organisational protection. It needs to support strategies fluid enough to reflect conditions without being watery. There has been a tremendous consistency and force at work from arts offices over the years. The cumulative effect of Local Authorities work has made a significant contribution to the nation and added hugely to the landscape of visual practice.

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